

From A to Zen – Exploring the Wisdom of China – Part 4 of 7

This series was originally published in 2009 in the Kelton Times Magazine in Dalian, People's Republic of China, and came to an abrupt halt when the publishers discontinued the publication.

Ecology before Economy

No topic has been capturing as much attention in past year as the global financial and economic crisis. It seems that nothing has been as unsettling for so many people for a long time. Besides numerous alarming effects, the real disaster seems to be that the global economy has been experiencing a drastic decline of growth; hence, the 2009 Davos meeting of the World Economic Forum under the title "shaping a post crisis world" listed "reviving global economic growth" as number one on its agenda. And this year's Summer Davos, held in Dalian, does not stray far from this most basic of economic tenets: "relaunching growth" was listed among the priorities of the meeting's aims.

However, while the economy is given all the attention, there is another crisis that seems to have been almost forgotten, mostly by the belief that fixing the economy is a precondition to solving all other problems: This is the ecological crisis that manifests itself in countless ways from climate change, over loss of biodiversity to environmental pollution, and many more potentially frightening developments.

Both ecology and economy derive from the same Greek root "oikos" meaning house, dwelling place, or habitation, but differ in that economy means the management thereof, and ecology, the study. Despite their close etymological relation as siblings, they evoke perspectives that rarely connect and even rarer fuse. Why is this, and why are we here concerned with ecology in an article that purports to be about Chinese philosophy? Well, as we will see, ancient religions and philosophies, which are seeing a revival in China, have a lot to say about ecology and the environment and may increasingly become agents of ecological change and education.

The reason why economy and ecology aren't typically spoken about in one breath might be that there is an inherent contradiction between the two concepts. The former is about the quasi-external management of affairs and resources in a system, whereas the latter looks at ecosystems, that is sustainable communities of plants, animals and inorganic matter, as essentially self-organising, in other words, *self-managing* systems.

The emergence of modern economic thinking is often traced back to the 16th century, a time in which European thinkers such as Rene Descartes and Francis Bacon spoke of "subjugating nature to advance the human estate" through the rational and systematic application of reason and science. The idea

of ecology, though appearing only in the late 19th century and remaining fairly uncommon in English until the 1960's, builds upon insights and rediscovers truths that are at the core of many spiritual traditions and ancient religions in the world.

And in the same way as Religion in its Latin root means to reconnect, to read again, or to consider carefully (the opinions diverge over this) so does the discipline of Ecology rediscover and reconnect to an ancient understanding of nature and the human's place in it, emphasizing above all things balance and harmony.

This is illustratively expressed in the following saying:

**Man did not weave the web of life,
He is merely a strand in it.
Whatever he does to the web,
He does to himself.**

In other words, we as humans are inextricably embedded in and intertwined with our environment. Material prosperity and economic success do not guarantee a sustainable subsistence, but only an ecological understanding of the interrelationships in our ecosystem and an awareness of the environmental impact of our economic behavior.

The two and a half thousand year old Tao Te Ching, one of China's most ancient and influential texts, written by the sage Lao Tzu expresses a similar idea. In chapter 29 it states:

**The external world is fragile,
and he who meddles with its natural way,
risks causing damage to himself.
He who tries to grasp it,
thereby loses it.**

It also captures other basic ideas of ecological thinking.
In chapter 41 it is written:

**The motion of nature is cyclic and returning,
its way is to yield for to yield is to become;
All things are born out of being,
being is born of non-being.**

In nature nothing goes to waste; everything is recycled, and is part of cycles which are themselves part of larger cycles. One organism's waste is another's subsistence; one's death another's source of life. Fritjof Capra, founder of the center for Eco-Literacy in California aptly sums up the main feature of an ecosystem: its constituents eat each other!

While recycling is a fundamental feature of nature it has only recently found its way into economic thinking. To this day great amounts of waste are produced which are not or cannot be recycled, often because it is not profitable; a greatly unecological state of affairs.

Philosopher Teilhard de Chardin once remarked that the only real atom (because indivisible) is the universe. In ancient Taoist terms this is expressed by the way of nature, the Tao: the essence of all life.

The Tao Te Ching continues:

**All things are microcosms of the Tao;
the world a microcosmic universe,
the nation a microcosm of the world,
the village a microcosmic nation;
the family a village in microcosmic view,
and the body a microcosm of one's own family;
from single cell to galaxy.**

Again, this echoes one of the key (re-)discoveries of ecology: From tiny ecosystems of bacteria and micro organisms, and the systems of lakes or rainforests to the entire planet and beyond: ecosystems nest in larger ecosystems, which again, nest in larger ecosystems, featuring essentially the same properties but with increasing complexity at each level. And from the tiniest to the largest system, there are complex webs of interrelationships connecting all with each other.

But perhaps more importantly, the overall attitude and mindset of Taoism and also Buddhism, another great influence in Chinese culture, speak volumes. Whereas many 16th century European forefathers spoke of conquering nature and subjugating her to the will of humanity, the traditions of the east have always sought harmony and a natural balance in the relationship between humans and their environment.

A key Buddhist tenet is the care and protection of all life on earth and even the alleviation of suffering for all living beings. According to tradition, for instance, every follower of the Buddha should plant a tree every few years and look after it until it is safely established.

Taoism, being a non-anthropocentric worldview, explicitly advocates following the way of nature and yielding to it, on the one hand through the way of no action and no intent, and on the other hand by being guided by the wisdom of the Tao. The Tao Te Ching says:

'Humanity follows the Earth, the Earth follows Heaven,

Heaven follows the Tao, and the Tao follows what is natural.'

Taoists therefore obey the Earth and do not try and force it to suit human needs.

With such an intrinsic ecological tradition it comes as little surprise that organisations with an environmental and ecological agenda are increasingly cooperating with religious and spiritual bodies to bring about positive change, also here in China.

One of these is the Alliance of Religions and conservation, short: ARC, founded by the Duke of Edinburgh, his Royal Highness Prince Philip. It is one of the few organisations that have a license from the Chinese government to work with religious groups within the country. The secular organisation's vision is "of people, through their beliefs, treading more gently upon the earth".

A timeline of ecological cooperation – a short case study

In 1995 ARC began to cooperate with the Chinese Taoist Association (CTA) which had been established in 1957 to act as a bridge between the government and the numerous and disparate Taoist temples and organisations in China. In that year a declaration on the environment was issued. It stated that:

“Taoism has a unique sense of value in that it judges affluence by the number of different species, ... If all things in the universe grow well, then a society is a community of affluence. If not, this kingdom is on the decline.”

In 2006, the year in which the first World Buddhist Forum was held in China, ARC co-hosted an inaugural workshop titled "Taoism and Conservation" together with the Louquantai Taoist Academy. This was held at the Louquantai Temple at Taibai Mountain, in Shaanxi Province, where Lao Tzu is said to have written the famous Tao Te Ching.

Here, out of the wish to rethink the role of Taoism in China, a new body was set up called the Temple Alliance on Ecology and Education. Also, a document was drawn up called the Qinling Declaration. In it all the participants promised to bring ecological education into temples, use farmed land sustainably, protect species and forests, save energy, and protect water resources.

In the same year, the CTA outlawed any Traditional Chinese Medicine that made use of endangered species.

In June of 2007, the year in which the first International Tao Te Ching Forum was held in Xi'an and Hong Kong, a second workshop was held at Taibaishan.

Under the title "Taking care of nature - Building up the Taoist Ecology Temple by our own hands, the participants decided to build the ecological Tiejieshu Taoist temple on the site of the original temple. This had been destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. By this time there had been so much interest in the ecological movement that the workshop was four times over-subscribed.

In October 2008 the third Taoist Ecology Forum took place in Jurong, a town near Nanjing in Jiangsu province. This had grown considerably in size and present were among many monks and nuns, Chinese government officials, and high level representatives from the United Nations. Here the Mao Shan agreement was signed, named after the sacred Taoist mountain of Maoshan where some of the leading ecological development has taken place.

What has come out of this decade of collaboration?

For once, the information and knowledge about ecology has been spread greatly through the vast network of over thousand Taoist temples and 100 Taoist associations within China. Temples such as the one at Maoshan in Jurong have installed solar powered lighting and reforested areas under their control. There and elsewhere efforts have been taken in recycling, energy saving, cutting down on waste and pollution, education and training amongst many other things. Lao Tzu has been defined as the god of Ecology along with newly created songs, prayers, and ceremonies that reinforce the Taoist's role in protecting the environment and championing ecological understanding.

What's interesting is that all this has come about as the outcome of fusion and joint effort; the cooperation between secular and religious organizations, the West and the East; one side with knowhow and funding, the other with its ancient wisdom and traditions and with its established networks of practice. It shows how peoples from different cultures can benefit from each other in a way that reminds of the Right Livelihood Award, often called the alternative Nobel Prize: Its philosophy is to "help the North to find a wisdom to match its science, and the South to find a science to match its ancient wisdom.

It remains to be hoped that in due time a similar form of cooperation and exchange will take place between ecologists and economists, so that the wisdom of the one discipline may complement the achievements of the other and serve the building of an economy which is not just obsessed with growth, but which champions ecological sustainability.

Links:

www.arcworld.org

www.chinadialogue.net